

Housekeeper files first complaint under county domestic worker law against Dickerson family

Advocates say family forced D.C. housekeeper to work in "slave-like conditions"

by Meghan Tierney | Staff Writer

A housekeeper who said she worked for a Dickerson family for nearly five months without pay is the first person to file a lawsuit under a new Montgomery County law that requires employers to provide domestic workers with a written contract.

Janet Gonzalez of Washington, D.C., a legal immigrant who moved to the U.S. from Venezuela 12 years ago, worked for Belinda and James Caron and their adult daughter Brittany Caron seven days a week for more than four months, according to a statement from Casa of Maryland, a nonprofit immigrant advocacy group. She was never paid or allowed to go home and only left the house when accompanied by the family, Gonzalez said.



The Carons had promised to pay Gonzalez \$350 a week and drive her to and from the Shady Grove Metro station, a 25-minute trip each way, at the beginning and end of the week so she could go home for the weekends, but she was instead forced to work in "slave-like conditions," Casa said.

"I felt that I would never leave the house and I felt a lot of fear," Gonzalez, 55, said in Spanish through an interpreter at a press conference in Rockville this morning. "I thought I would never see my family again."

The family was verbally abusive and restricted her phone access, Gonzalez said. No buses serve the rural home and there are no sidewalks along the roads, she said.

"It started out good but it became a process of manipulation over time," said Gonzalez, who has two children in Venezuela. "I didn't know what to do, I was desperate."

Gonzalez wrote down the number for a national human trafficking hotline while watching a television show about the issue and called three days later after the family had left the house and she was able to find a phone, she said. Gonzalez was connected to Casa's domestic worker committee, which arrived at the house in late January with 15 domestic workers and community advocates to help her leave, according to Casa. The family was home at the time and tried to stop her by blocking the exits, Gonzalez said.

Belinda, Brittany and James Caron could not be reached for comment.

Gonzalez, now working as a housekeeper in D.C., filed a federal lawsuit against the Carons today, requesting lost wages and punitive damages, said her attorney Nathaniel Norton of the Maryland Legal Aid Bureau. Gonzalez is owed about \$14,000 in unpaid wages, Norton said. The lawsuit alleges breach of contract, fraudulent misrepresentation and violations of federal and state labor and wage laws and the federal Trafficking Victims Prevention Act, Norton said.

The family was reported to Montgomery County Police and the U.S. Department of Justice but both declined to file charges, Norton said.

Gonzalez also filed a complaint with the county Office of Consumer Protection, the first complaint under a county law enacted in January 2009 requiring employers to provide domestic workers with a written contract, said director Eric Friedman. The findings of the investigation are expected to assist with the court case, Friedman said.

"I don't think this case is unique," said Councilman George Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park, co-sponsor of the domestic workers bill, adding that he expected more violations to come to light as more people find out about their rights under the law.

Casa gets about five calls a year about cases as serious as Gonzalez's but underreporting is a problem, said Ashwini Jaisingh, a Casa domestic worker organizer.

"There's a lot of fear among women who speak out as well as social and geographical isolation," Jaisingh said.